

## TEACHING AND ACADEMIC LIFE

By Ronald S. Berman

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*Dr. Berman delivered this presentation at Hillsdale during the Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar on "Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning."*

The problems of education seem easily defined but are at least partly in the eye of the beholder. University administrators see the problem in material ways: enrollments are low, costs are high, some traditional fields of study must be replaced by programs that reflect consumer interest more directly, and growth, unfortunately, can no longer be sustained. The general public has a different view of the educational predicament. It would not be fair to suggest that it is concerned only with busing, taxation, or other social issues. Public interest in education—possibly because most families have unavoidable contacts with educational institutions—is focused on opportunity and performance. Education means something else to the media, which are alive to the opposition of interests, as in affirmative action and in other adversary relationships. But the media tend not to see educational problems in terms of the characteristic operation of institutions.

Occasional summaries, like those of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, are somewhat more ample. Such reports have in the last few years made statements transcending the issues of demographic shrinkage and inflationary costs, subjects which, within educational bureaucracies, account for the bulk of their



difficulties. But, detailed as they are, some of these reports seem not altogether persuasive.

The Carnegie Commission has suggested that higher education is responsible for the spread of social justice, the definition of which is understood to be the reduction of inequality of income. A second criterion for the universities is the attainment of higher consciousness about ecology. Prominent in this argument are two tactical ends: the reduction of pollution and of the birthrate. The report did not attempt to relate social justice and ecology, although some kind of discrimination seems necessary; the latter implies industrial restraint while the former is dependent on industrial expansion: the better the economy works, the more pie there is to divide. A third criterion, experimentation, was invoked in order to encourage what was called "alternative lifestyles and modes of thought." There was another contradiction here, also left unpursued. That is, with a curriculum already limited by the

im•primis (im-pri-mis) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin in primis, among the first (things).

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amount of courses that can be contained by individual programs, the incorporation of new material means the literal displacement of other things. If "alternative lifestyles" means the displacement of courses in, say, physics or biology, then a regression of some kind is plainly implied. And if they should displace courses more or less in their own genre, that is, within the humanities, then the displacement becomes even more obvious through comparison of the quality and value of the styles, modes and ideas competing.

The report of the Carnegie Commission suggested, rightly enough, that there has been a crisis of confidence among faculty, administration, trustees, public officials and taxpayers. It backed this up with the results of a national poll indicating the erosion of affection and respect for education. But the Commission seemed intent only upon the redress of affection. Consistently throughout the report, and especially in that part devoted to significant educational policies aimed at improvement, language and idea centered on exhortation rather than procedure. It noted the traumatic loss of purpose in academe, the loss of nerve among faculty, and nostalgia for a better and less complicated past. But the way to deal with disillusionment seemed not to include curriculum grading, or assignment. The Commission called for more inspired teaching—for those whom it had earlier noted were sunk in the past, worried about the future, and in need of inspiration themselves. It asked for more attention to the creative arts—although in a time of intellectual disappointment creativity tends to become synonymous with a general tendency to define production by attitude and intention.

Not among the recommendations were the creation of intelligence or of a definable sort of creativity, *i.e.*, in terms of accomplishment. Likewise absent was a thesis which has determined cultural attitudes toward learning since it was stated by Francis Bacon, the advancement of learning. The report suffered by comparison with one done about a century ago by Cardinal Newman.

In almost every way the report seemed to model itself on the domestic program of social agencies like HEW. It called, for example, for more counselling, as if the problem were in fact the adjustment of adolescent personality to a system fundamentally opposed to its necessities. It called for mixing different age groups in higher education, and for "broad learning experiences." Two of the words in that phrase, "broad" and "experience," have become code words, like "lifestyle" and other terms indicating the subjectivity of standards. In almost every respect there was a conflict or hiatus between the recommendations and previously consensual modes of academic achievement. The report did not call for more work, for rigorous standards, for assignments in writing or for any of the practices which define themselves by competition or ranking. It did not address itself to the measurement of improvement in individual performance.

The loss of confidence perceived by the Commission could, within its definition, have resulted only from the failure of human nature to be better than it is.

I hesitate to discuss the issue of educational performance in terms of conditions like alienation, lifestyles or *zeitgeist*. And I think it very difficult to talk about a crisis or failure of nerve in more than one person at a time. It is possible to talk about educational problems—and some of their solutions—in more concrete ways. The problems are many and it may be that we should select what we mean to improve. And, to concentrate on what can be improved.

It is perhaps not likely that all the theory in the world can deal with inflationary costs. But the matter of, say, the annual declines in college board results seems far more containable by discussion. Unless we presume a biological change so far invisible to science, the annual decline in examination performance for about a decade has its cause in the policies and operations of educational institutions.

Reading and writing are of course the two most basic educational activities, and most courses (at least in the humanities) are simply variants of these procedures. I'd like to discuss reading and writing in higher education, and some of the policies that govern the transmission—or the consumption—of ideas. And I will take up after this the ways or procedures defining academic life.

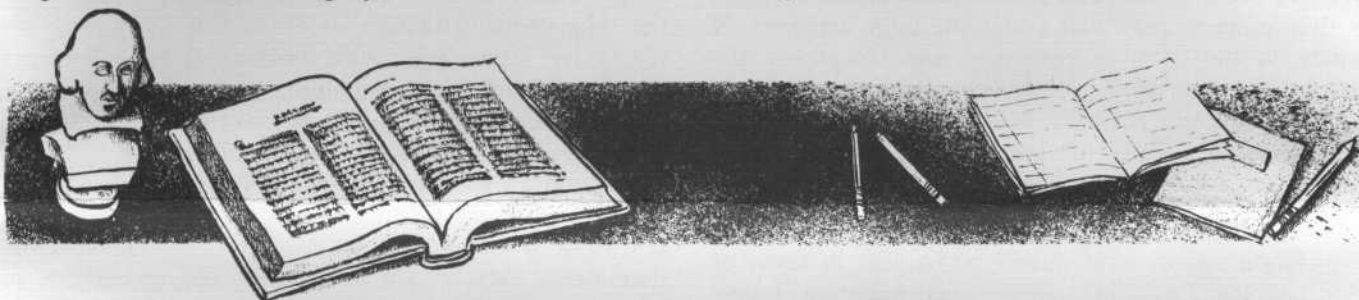
Arnold Toynbee devoted some fairly blistering pages of *A Study of History* to the fate of education under democracy. What he says about the connection of amusement and literacy is worth remembering:

The bread of universal education is no sooner cast upon the waters than a shoal of sharks arises from the depths and devours the children's bread under the educator's very eyes. In the educational history of England the dates speak for themselves. The edifice of universal elementary education was, roughly speaking, completed by Forster's Act in 1870; and the Yellow Press was invented some twenty years later—as soon, that is, as the first generation of children from the national schools had acquired sufficient purchasing power.

Toynbee's remarks are one of the early guns in a battle of the century, that between the literacy of education and the literacy of the marketplace. Literacy is now a commodity like any other, and if our experience of the printed image, the written word and the electronic transmission of both adds up to anything, it is the recognition of an industry that, as Toynbee suggested, does capitalize on education.

Education itself has not been slow to recognize the advantages of certain policies. Schools create programs to attract students, to retain their tuition or its state equivalent, and to justify the curriculum by numbers enrolled. They are pretty much dependent on their customers, especially if they are institutions supported

by state funds. Even though in the public sector, schooling has become one of the big industries. The national inventory of its facilities takes in enormous acreage, pension plans lusted after by such as the City of New York, tremendous bureaucracies—and political relationships making all this possible. The burgeoning of institutions like community colleges and junior colleges, the appearance of programs like extended education, and the “broadening” of the curriculum testify to the fact that schools employ a good many people, have substantial appropriations, and are viewed regionally as important institutional employers.



Industrial democracies are interested in making things available cheaply and in large numbers. This is characteristic of most things we produce, and education is not exempt from the rule. When Tocqueville wrote about American culture he was able to say, with some gratification, “There is hardly a pioneer’s hut which does not contain a few odd volumes of Shakespeare. I remember that I read the feudal drama of Henry V for the first time in a log house.” And yet the institutionalizing of culture seemed to him to have economic analogies:

When none but the wealthy had watches, they were almost all very good ones; few are now made which are worth much, but everybody has one in his pocket. Thus the democratic principle not only tends to direct the human mind to the useful arts, but it induces the artisan to produce with great rapidity many imperfect commodities, and the consumer to content himself with these commodities.... Something analogous to what I have already pointed out in the useful arts then takes place in the fine arts; the productions of artists are more numerous, but the merit of each production is diminished.... In aristocracies, a few great pictures are produced; in democratic countries, a vast number of insignificant ones. In the former, statues are raised of bronze; in the latter, they are modelled in plaster.

The “imperfect commodities” that Tocqueville described had their analogy in objects and ideas. And, one sometimes thinks, in policies.

The decline in so-called “basic skills” has been observable for some time. Summaries of annual test results and local institutional experience appear in *Social Indicators 1976* and in *Missions of the College Curriculum*, both of which attest to the institutional

response to that decline. One of the most interesting and important points to note is that the decline of ability to read is accompanied by decline of assignment to correct that condition, and by the decline in the confidence of instruction to affect it. A summary of conditions at a number of regional campuses in *Missions of the College Curriculum* indicates that very large numbers of incoming students are deficient in reading and writing in general, and in particular have extremely low preparation in mathematics and composition. But the response to this has been, in institutional terms, to increase the number of elective courses,

decrease requirements, remove courses which, like the study of languages, automatically compensate for both general and tactical deficiencies, and impose “remedial” courses as a counter-measure to illiteracy.

There is one thread in common with these, and it is illustrated by the following brief passage from the report of The Advisory Panel on Scholastic Aptitude Test Score Decline of 1977. It identifies decline not entirely with cultural character or environment, and is less interested in Vietnam or the advent of women or minorities as contributing causes. In this section, it dwells on policy that

diminishes seriousness of purpose and attention to mastery of skills and knowledge in the learning process in the schools, at home, and in society generally; among the specific symptoms are automatic grade-to-grade promotions, grade inflation, tolerance of absenteeism, lowering of the demand levels of text books and other teaching and learning materials, the reduction of homework, lowering of college entrance standards, and the inclusion of compensatory or “remedial” courses in colleges.

It may be that decline has been caused by its treatment, the alternative being to believe that ignorance exists in epidemic form, that it is caught inadvertently and that the thing that causes it is too small to be seen in our microscopes.

Some of the points implied by the above are worth discussion, and I will address them in due course. It is especially interesting to note the tolerance of institutions to decline in performance. But at this point I would like to mention something that seems simply mechanical, but which underlies intellectual performance, and that is reading and the consequent accumula-



tion of knowledge it provides, and the translation of that knowledge into what one hopes are its higher forms.

Simply for the sake of convenience, because I make my living at it and I assume most people on campus are familiar with it, I take the subject of Shakespeare. Because of the mass of Shakespeare's works, because he lived in a period incredibly rich in the production of journals, essays, poetry and theology, it is really necessary—indispensable—to teach his works within several contexts. One is that of the Tudor world, a second the Renaissance, a third the mass of his plays themselves, with their labyrinth of recurrence. Since he wrote in what is very nearly a foreign language for us, according to ideas of style that need to be sensed in spite of ourselves, the act of reading is native to his study. Tudor English is by no means as distant as Chaucerian English, but I would hazard a small bet that even professors of English need a dictionary at least once or twice for each page of it. Now, Shakespeare is commonly thought of as a cultural possession, available readily because we know enough to read him. Yet I would as soon give a thirteen-year old the keys to a started automobile as the plays of Shakespeare without the prior knowledge for their understanding.

"When I was young," Dr. Johnson once said, "I read hard." He did not mean that he spent an afternoon in the library. He devoured the contents of his father's bookstore, of the libraries of Lichfield, Oxford and London, and most of Western culture. In a sense, Western culture retains his indelible imprint, and not only because of his profound morality and surpassing intelligence. His mind and sensibility were shaped by the accumulation of knowledge, and then shaped our own. His contemporary, Gibbon, wrote of the decision to do *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and stated quite calmly that in order to do so he would have to read the entire corpus of extant Latin literature. Hard cases make bad law: we may not be up to that, and students certainly aren't. But embodied in Gibbon's decision and Johnson's omnivore appetite is the concept of comparative and accumulative knowledge. Ideas develop from one generation to another; and what may be seen in Jefferson or Madison can be traced to Erasmus, Montaigne and Locke—to say nothing of the distant sources from which they themselves flow. The analogy then is pretty simple, although it is not exactly a re-wording of back to basics. What is suggested is that facts accumulate until they form relationships, that certain disciplines, particularly in the humanities, do not so much develop abstractions as they put together, block by block, the information necessary to sustain thought. Although it differs for each individual there is a kind of critical mass to achieve in education, that is, the amount of descriptive and classifiable knowledge underlying the intellectual response that can be made to it.

Far too much educational ideology now suggests that our feelings about ourselves are more important than matters of more general substance; others argue that modernity implies different attitudes about work and performance. A thoughtful article by Everett Ladd in a recent issue of *Public Opinion* makes a beginning at quantifying this. Ladd summarizes some fairly elaborate samplings by the National Opinion Research Center and by Yankelovich, Skelly and White which indicate a relationship between education and performance. "The college trained," he says, "when compared to the high school and grade school educated, urge less emphasis on money, more on 'self fulfillment,' less on... 'sacrifices'... and the like." It is worth noting that these virtues are not active, but passive, which is to say that the good life is perceived to be the product of avoidance rather than of any particular creativity. As a student of theology—which for most of its history has encompassed psychology—I have doubts about self fulfillment proceeding from inertia. Since almost half the college educated polled do not consider work a value, the culture may be trying to tell us something about the evolution of class and individual motives.

The idea that work is unimportant would have been news to Eliot and Pound, Joyce and Yeats, and those others who gave modernity its design. It must be news to virtually any practicing poet. Yet there is moral discomfort aroused by the idea of assigning enough to make assignment intelligible. You may recall seeing in *The New York Times* last year an article on the number of books read in courses now taught by those who had at one time been students in those courses. The consensus was that students now read about half as much as their instructors had done. I was involuntarily concerned in this because one of my own students was featured in the article; and the comparison for the course in question was the assignment I gave him when he was a student with the assignment he gave out when he later taught the course. The difference in time was very short, only about ten years. The consensus of those covered by the *Times*—and since I wrote a column on this issue, of my own findings as well—was that there has been something of a shift in the nature of assignment. It depends now on different variables. One of these is the instructor's standing in his own academic community, and with an administration that finds long assignments oppositional. A second is the instructor's sense of his standing in the intellectual world at large, within a society and class that does in fact find that "self fulfillment" is an overriding value. And, finally, he finds himself in a different relationship to students than that obtained even so short a time ago as his own baccalaureate.

It may be that the academy is not really an ivory tower, but has internalized certain social and cultural ideas. Heavy reading assignments are conflictual. They indicate a difference in cultural style between modern

and not-modern, between those whose social outlook centers on an idea of selfhood and those whose outlook centers on an idea of what is professional. It is not, clearly, that to give short assignments is unprofessional: a line of poetry can keep a man busy for a year. The central point is that teaching in general depends on the accumulation of responses. And it is harder, evidently, to convey the importance of that process and others dependent on structure, memory, generalization and relationship within a set of social and educational assumptions that devalue those modes.

The non-educational media, especially *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, have done a good job of covering the adversary situations of education. I believe they have done a notably better job than the educational media, which generally do not dry their wash in public. The *Times* piece on reading was followed by coverage of writing, and while the subject was the high schools of New York, it referred itself to the whole context of higher education. Evidently writing is not assigned in many schools, and the argument for that is that there are too many students, too many papers to grade, and not enough incentive. That is from the point of view of the faculty; in addition, things should not be assigned which are beyond student expectations. Finally, writing is laborious, and will not be done well.

Current attitudes about writing have a good deal to do with the possibilities of teaching. Because writing well has for so long been associated with middle-class style and values, it has come to share in the feelings addressed to bourgeois morality. The argument has often been made that middle-class language is frigid, inferior to dialect, and not important anyhow. If speaking according to rule and grammar indicates such frozen-mindedness, and draws such barrages of counter-cultural feelings, what can we say of style? Bourgeois education has in it an unavoidable residue of Thomas Arnold at Rugby. It does at its worst mean a suffocating kind of rectitude, and an embarrassment of delivery. The middle class is fundamentally ill at ease with language, and prefers to read it rather than speak it; it is simply not a conversational kind of society, at least not any more. But at its best, there is a kind of bourgeois style that reminds us why society finds a form for its expression. Language extends itself into the study of other languages because it reflects a blatant belief that we ought to deal with other nations. Languages of a certain sort—English, French and Yiddish, to name a few—become *lingua franca* because of the nationalistic, commercial and other bourgeois functions they undertake.

Perhaps the study of language has a commercial bias, but the study of history indicates quickly enough that cultures have always addressed the problem of their own diffusion. We translate because it is good in itself to know what other ideas are; and it is only despotism

that finds the diffusion of language dangerous. It is one of the great accomplishments of bourgeois civilization that it should have taken seriously this great preliminary to art, ideas and business.

A less high-minded approach, always to be desired, suggests that the study of language is the base for the study of anything else. When Gulliver went to Laputa he found houses being built from the roof down, which is nice work if you can get it. But the basis of most other forms of education is the mastery of language. It is only through this kind of study that memory, association and deduction take place. And the fact of language has two tactical consequences. It turns out that for most people, nothing on their own minds is ever understood until it has been articulated. People simply do not know what they know—and do not think what they know—until formulation. For a decade or so teaching has in general found itself in a milieu much less sympathetic to conscious formulation than has historically been the case. Unconsciousness or higher consciousness have set back intellectual work not only because they suppose hostility to action. They simply do not deal with language, which is why they find it so difficult, and so conflictual, to deal with, express or debate their own dogmas.

What I am suggesting is that education needs reading and writing; but I am not suggesting that we can tidy up the problem by going “back to basics.” Modernism has intervened between us and the McGuffey Reader. The issue of reading and writing is not to be decided because of familiar comfort, or ideological agreeableness. Reading and writing are the two fundamentals of intellectual growth, and we value them for that—not, as Cardinal Newman observed, for any other bonus of citizenship or manners or morals that we would like to have them confer.

It is unlikely that they can be effective unless there are supplementary changes. The “remedial” concept, for example, is based all too plainly on the principle of muddling through after the fact. It takes selected groups of students through a brief exposure to writing; the course is usually taught by someone without faculty status; the grade is quite meaningless; and the work is not directly connected to course credit, major, or degree. This is the first of those contextual things that affect educational performance; the others might read as follows:

- The replacement of remedial by functional courses, especially in composition. A composition course has defined assignments, counts for credit, and is within the orbit of a given department on campus. It should of course be taught by the faculty of that department rather than by hired hands.

- The replacement of administrative disciplinary options. It is hard now for teaching faculty to make certain grades stick, and to assign a grade in the case of



plagiarism. In general the offices of the various Deans, student courts, and departmental reviews make it difficult, if not impossible, to stop the inflation of grades or the silent evasion of failure.

— Grade inflation is probably less serious than course inflation, *e.g.*, the abundance of offerings for credit in astrology, encounter sessions, pop psychology, going to the movies, and watching television. One of the significant expenses of academic administration is the addition of new courses. It means the hiring of new faculty, and consequent economies elsewhere. In short, in order to be popular enough to attract students so that more money can come in, large amounts of money in the form of personnel and fringe benefits have to be expended. As for the intellectual consequences, they are not very good. It should be an iron principle of academic life that what is available elsewhere—say on drugstore bookshelves—need not be on a university curriculum.

— Good causes also should be banned in favor of good courses. Environmentalism, anti-pollution, political internship, tape recording for oral history, so-called independent study are built upon a theory of student interest that has little relationship to facts. Most students want to get on with it. Most want to get a sound, timely and useful education. But there are constitutencies in the university even as there are in political life, and they often affect our own equivalent of legislation.

— The sooner that pass-fail options, late withdrawals from courses, incompletes, and other practices that

evoke sympathy but do little for productivity are dismissed, the sooner intellectual work will find its natural relationship to standards of performance.

Eventually one has to leave the discussion of absolutes and think of tactics that affect the situation. Some of those I have mentioned ought to make work more intelligible; and it is possible that they may prove more attractive, in terms of their logic, than the policies they should displace. In a way, those policies are now reactionary; they are the relics of the sixties, and are directed at winning the favor of a constituency that no longer really exists. Perhaps the strangest thing about the educational situation today is that its abuses are regressive. There is no wide movement among students today to water the curriculum, nor is there anything remotely resembling a political movement with cultural overtones. The "reforms" in education that have become abuses follow a well-established historical pattern: they come about a decade too late, and they constitute a series of obstacles even more undesirable than those they sought to replace. The procedures of education tending to lessen work, to make ideas less serious, to allow subjectivity free play and to identify professional activity with what feels good are addressed to the past. What we have in education right now is that rarest of all political phenomena, a political program without a constituency. Insofar as these procedures are criticized by observers, are suspect to the students governed by them, and are generally perceived to be ineffectual, there really seems very little reason why the situation cannot be improved.

Lectures for the Ludwig von Mises Distinguished Visiting Lecture Series at Hillsdale College during the 1978-79 school year:

Dan Quayle, Member of Congress, Indiana 4th Congressional District.	November 15, 1978
George Bush, former United Nations Ambassador and former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency.	February 13, 1979
William Simon, former Secretary of the Treasury.	February 28, 1979
Benjamin Rogge, Professor of Political Economy at Wabash College.	March 6, 1979
Marina Whitman, Professor of Economics, University of Pittsburgh; host of "Economically Speaking," a 26-week PBS television series.	April 25, 1979

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